

Adam: This KPI or OKR system, much like any top-down system thrown at motivated people, leads to some unintended consequences. For instance, porting Lazada to the internal platform was one thing, but actually running the company, maybe that was a less exciting project.

Son: This is hearsay, so I'm not saying this is a source of truth, but there were rumors to be like they think Lazada to be a not profitable place for them to meet the KPI, so nobody wanted to be a CEO of a failing position. Lazada actually changed CEO quite a lot because nobody was meeting their KPI. The culture there is quite cutthroat and people were competing for nice position so that they can be set up for success.

Adam: There's a way it sounds very foreign. There's another way that it sounds like Google.

Son: Well, I cannot tell you because I have never worked for Google, but what I can tell you is that they move very fast and I don't think anybody has been moving as fast. Especially if you work in a Western country, in European, or in North America, you are not moving fast. This guy move a lot faster.

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Whatever you can do to help, I truly appreciate it!

Thanks! Adam Gordon Bell

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Singapore



Son went to work in Singapore, who vibrant airport affected how Son thinks about planning.

Adam: Okay. So Alibaba and China move fast and that can be exciting, but for Son, it had downsides.

Son: Alibaba obviously providing a lot, but I was interested in learning what else is there and I was a little bit burned-out with all of the Google Translate of Chinese documentation. I was looking for other opportunities and my boss was like, “Hey, I’m going to the exact same company but in Singapore.”

Adam: So Son stayed working for Lazada, but moved to Singapore where his time on site made him the expert for his team.

Son: Then I get to teach my teammates about Alibaba tech. They were using Python at the time, a lot of Python, Django, Flask self-hosted on Ali Cloud and I was like, “No, guys. Here’s Ali Java. Here’s all the goodness. Hey.” Imagine Spring Java, but everything come with battery-equipped. You want a database? Here’s a database. You want a message queue? Here’s a message queue. You don’t need to worry about infrastructure. Everything came out of the box, and that’s was actually a downside because I start to realize that the world outside was moving quite fast. Even though I was quite an expert in internal technology in Alibaba, I know nothing about the world outside.

Adam: Son wanted to keep growing and learning and not pigeonhole himself into one company, into one tech stack, so he set a deadline for himself.

Son: So I set up a plan that after I arrive in Singapore for a year, I would need to learn new technology and explore the job market. At the time, I was actually interviewing with Google in Singapore. I attend several of their tech talk, get to talk to the G Pay team over there in Singapore. They were doing a lot of interesting things.

Adam: Google famously has a super long hiring process and in the meantime, Son found an opportunity to do something completely different.

Son: At the time, I was getting to know my girlfriend at the time and now my wife. I was like, okay, I need to settle down someplace and good luck buying a house in Singapore. Singapore was way too expensive. Your best luck is being able to rent a nice apartment and that’s pretty much it. You would not even get a car. It would cost you millions to get a cars and that’s insane.

Amsterdam



Son moved to Amsterdam to work for booking.com

Adam: Son got an offer from Booking.com. Booking.com is an online travel agency based in the Netherlands in Amsterdam, and in some ways, Amsterdam is the opposite of Singapore.

Son: I took that opportunity and said goodbye to Singapore even though I love Singapore so much. It's such a nice country, wonderful, strongly recommend.

Adam: Where's the food better?

Son: Oh, Singapore, definitely. Netherland is like the worst. Oh, my god. No, seriously. Even Dutch hate the food in the Netherland. So I left Singapore for the Netherland August 2019, and then me and my wife officially get married on the cusp of COVID.

Work Life Balance

Son: I remember my product manager on the first day I came to work. He sit me down with my team lead. My team lead was actually joining with me. We did the orientation together. My product manager sit both of us down and explain, "Hey, guys. Booking paid a lot of money to relocate you guys here. We want you to success here. That means you need to prioritize your life first. You need to be able to find a house to rent. You need to be able to do all your paperwork. So in the next upcoming month, if you need to take time out, just go and then come back and tell us later," and that is such a huge opener because that's just a mental shift, completely 180 compared to Alibaba.

Because Alibaba, everything was work, work, work. Your life is in the company. Your metric is important. Booking was not like that. Booking was like, "No. We respect you as a human. We know that you have a family. We know that you have needs. Take care of them and then come back to us. Work your best," and that's just changed everything. In Booking, I have teammates who are blind. I have teammates who are gay, lesbian, disabled. We were all able to hang out together. No problem. There's no discrimination. It's just a huge, open, and welcome culture. Very diverse pool of folks over there. I just love it so much. We still have massive traffic. We still have problem at scale that we have to take care of and yeah, it was very

fun trying to find work-life balance in midst of all that, in midst of COVID, in midst of relocation, and in midst of new marriage as well.

Reflection



TRAVEL MORE,
WORRY LESS

Son's advice is that developers should travel more.

Adam: So for now, Son has found his place in the world. He and his wife are still in the Netherlands. He found his home and a place where the work culture works best for who he is, but he only knows that because of the experiences he had. If he had started at Booking first thing, maybe he wouldn't have realized what he had because he'd have no comparison. That fact shaped the advice that he offers to others:

Son: Life is diverse. Before I get to work in China, it was a black box to me. It was not occurred to me that there was a payment system that's so advanced that people would refuse using cash. Yeah, I know credit card exists, but that doesn't mean when I hand you cash, you will refuse to receive it. Just at the same time, going to Southeast Asia, seeing various different startup trying to get themself a place on the map was hugely game-changing because it enabled me to think in term of business, in term of thinking, how would I operate this if I were the CEO or CTO? I also learned how to party. In Waterloo, they drink bubble tea. You can get way better party going to Toronto than trying to do it in Waterloo. Going back to Vietnam, every one week or two weeks is a drinking party.

A lot of beers we consume, a lot of hot pot. The food is wonderful over there. When I go to Singapore, I learn what planning can bring. You can just enter the city and you can see. The first thing you see in Singapore is the best, most beautiful looking airport in the world. You can see like, "Oh, my God. How much would it take for my government to build this airport?" Infinity money would not change this because this is not a problem with money. This is a problem with planning. Then Netherland, they taught me to be open-minded. They taught me about work-life balance and all that is just come back to be travel more.

This is not an advertisement for Booking.com, but travel more and learn more from it and keep an open mind, because yeah, maybe Western media can tell you a lot of shit about China, about how evil things can be, but try to go over there and try to see how people live. Being able to see thousands of people eating

lunch all at once surrounding you or looking like you, because I'm Asian, make you humble. It does have a humble feeling entering that cafeteria and see hundred of people lining up for the same dish. It makes you feel insignificant. **It's a massive world out there. Travel more.**

Outro

Adam: That was the show!

Thank you so much to Son! You can find him on Twitter. I'll put a link on the episode page.

In an upcoming bonus episode for podcast supporters, Son is going to share his views on the future of Chinese software development and a little bit about the Chinese expansion via the Belt and Road Initiative.

It's super interesting stuff!

A lot of the innovations that Alibaba is doing are out there on GitHub and they're open sourced and they're for the taking, but outside of certain system researcher circles, it feels like nobody's paying attention. That's going to change. So support the podcast and on Patreon, you can get access to that episode that I'll release in the future.

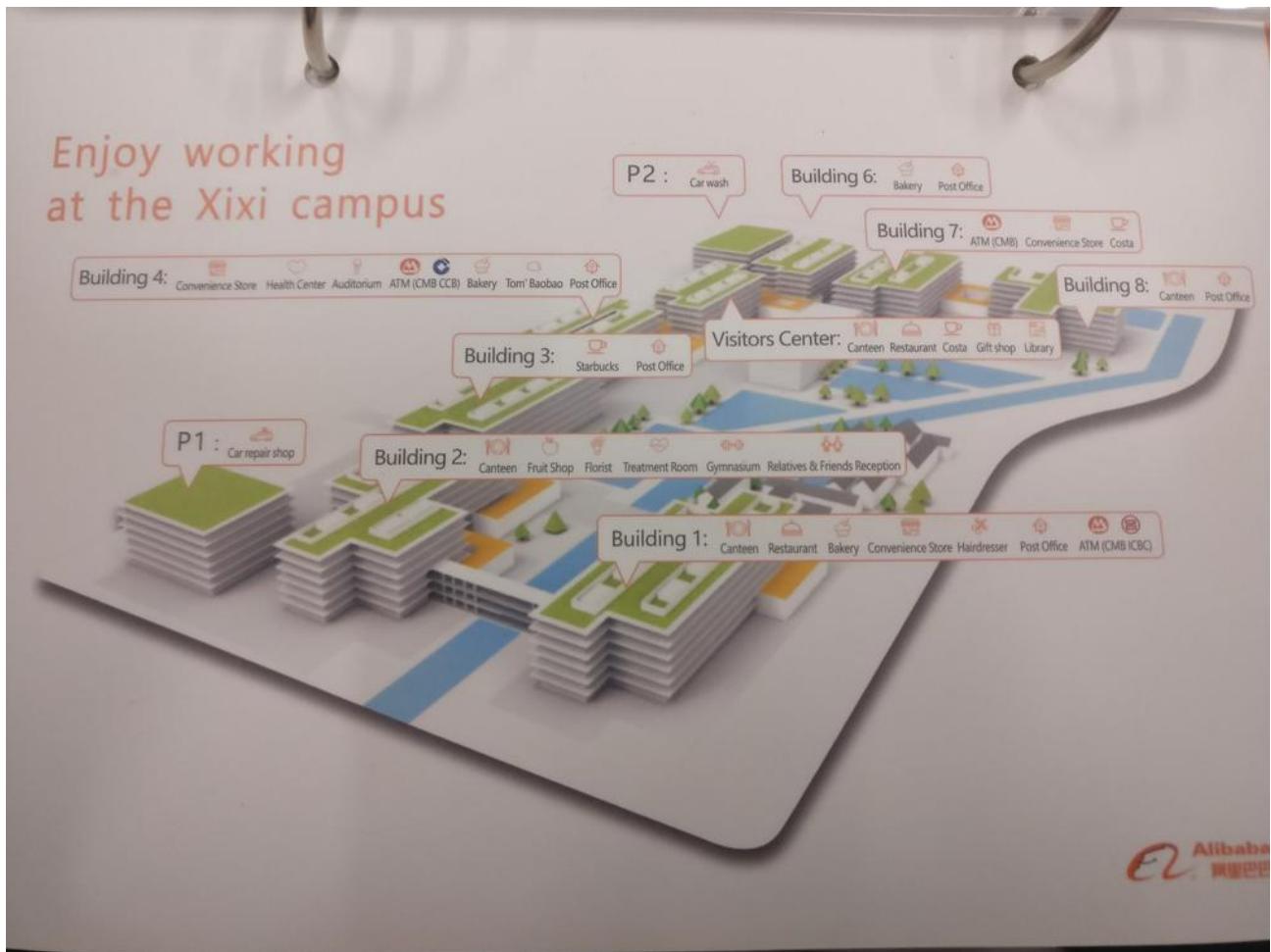
Also, Son's career keeps evolving, so you'll hear a little bit about his latest career pivot, which is how I ended up meeting him. Also, if you like to hear a little bit of the fun backstory behind the episodes, then this'll be a great opportunity to hear that.

Until next time, thank you so much for listening.

Bonus Content From Son

Son: I think just words could be pretty dry, so here are some visual aid from my trip to Alibaba Campus in 2018.

Son: Here is the main campus map. U shaped with the main residence of Jackma being in the middle of it (the grey part)

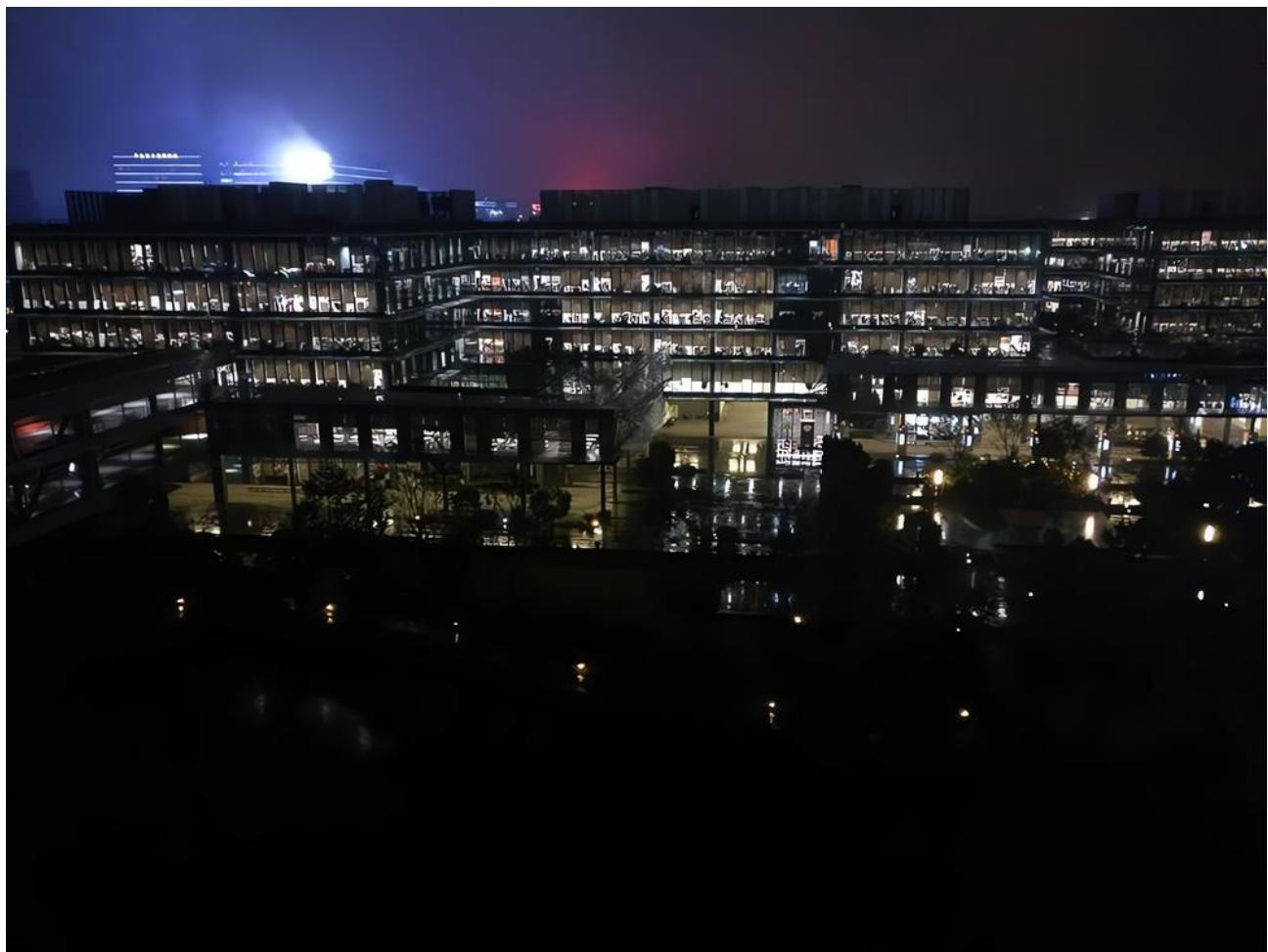


Son: Here is the campus by day:



Son: Here is the campus at 7-9PM, 9 buildings fully lit on all floors:





Son: Here are the tents in the hall way, gender separated for folks to sleep in whenever.



Son: For satellite campuses, offices would have beds like this instead of the tents:



Son: The entrance to each building is equipped with badge scanner, facial scanner was newly added in summer 2018:



Son: On campaign days, there would be maids handing out swags to engineers:



Son: or free massages from professionals



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